



Photo contributed by Paul Pettypiece

A formation of Harvards fly over the Penhold Base during a wing parade in this undated photo. The airport had a long military history, including its use as a Royal Air Force flight training school from 1941 to 1944, and service as a NATO pilot training centre from 1952 to 1965.

Military heritage not forgotten

BY HARLEY RICHARDS
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One of the busiest regional airports in Canada, Red Deer Airport has scheduled passenger service, a steady stream of charter flights and a growing number of aviation-related businesses. But its roots are grounded in military service, with thousands of air force pilots trained overhead between 1941 and 1965.

It's a history that many Central Albertans — and even residents of nearby Springbrook — are unaware of, said Gary Hillman, vice-president of the Harvard Historical Aviation Society. His group is working to preserve that history, including developing an aviation museum.

A record of the airport compiled by the society describes how an airfield was developed by the newly formed Red Deer Aero Club and the Red Deer Board of Trade in 1930. Located near the Red Deer River on the C&E Trail, it quickly came under the control of the federal government, which wanted to establish a series of landing strips across the country.

By 1938, the Department of Transport had decided to build an airport on farmland northwest of Penhold. Runways were levelled and a few buildings constructed, but development really took off after Canada agreed in 1939 to participate in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

After opening as Royal Canadian Air Force Manning Depot, the airport was turned over to the Royal Air Force in 1941 and became No. 36 Service Flying Training School. Its mandate was to train pilots, who had already learned to fly light aircraft, to operate multi-engine aircraft.

By early 1944, some 1,500 trainees and staff were on site, along with approximately 100 planes. Nearly 1,300 pilots, most of whom were with the

Royal Air Force, graduated — and 20 people lost their lives in training accidents.

By the end of 1944, with the war nearing its conclusion, Royal Air Force personnel and equipment had left the base. It served briefly as home to the Royal Canadian Air Force's Technical Signals Unit, before the Department of Transport took over the facility in 1945 and demolished many of the buildings there.

The airport returned to military service in 1951, after Canada offered to train air crews from NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) countries. No. 4 Flying Training School became active in 1952, with its first class consisting of 22 Canadian, 10 British, seven Italian and five Dutch trainees.

Most on the training was done aboard single-engine North American Harvards, but in 1963 the Department of National Defence described plans to bring in 62 jet trainers. However, concerns about flying jet trainers in the busy air corridor between Calgary and Edmonton prompted the department to change its mind.

Instead, NATO training at the base ended in 1965 and the Harvards were decommissioned, said Hillman. When the city expressed regrets about the end to its long-standing tradition of having a Harvard fly over the Red Deer Exhibition parade route, the base commander arranged for one of the planes to be recommissioned.

"It flew an official RCAF flight during the Exhibition parade in July of that particular year, and then it was decommissioned as soon as it landed. And that's the one that's on the post out here right now, beside the terminal building."

The next decade was one of change and transformation for the base, which was renamed CFB (Canadian Forces Base) Penhold in 1966. It served as the home to No. 43 Radar Squadron — which was part of North American

Air Defence Command's Pinetree line — and 743 Communications Squadron, as well as the Regional Emergency Government Headquarters, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Training School, the Canadian Forces Junior Leader School, the Air Reserve Training Centre and a refrigeration maintenance school. It was also the longtime site of the Royal Canadian Air Cadet summer camp.

The airport became the Red Deer Industrial Airport in 1966, with the city assuming responsibility for managing the federal facility. The businesses that moved there included a number from a civilian air field near Hwy 11, said Hillman, adding that this other airport had been a bustling aviation centre.

"There was pilot-training going on there, there were some companies that had their personal airplanes there, there were a couple of charter companies as I recall, and they also had flight training."

Scheduled passenger flights were offered at the Red Deer Industrial Airport, but none of the services lasted long. However, the Central Alberta airport was considered in the late 1960s for a much larger role in the passenger industry, said Bruce Thorne, a former navigation systems engineer with Transport Canada.

"Transport Canada was looking at it at one point in time as the major airport for Alberta," said Thorne, who moved to Red Deer in 1999.

"The Canadian Transport Commission said, 'Hey, if we had the one airport 90 miles from each city, it could be connected to Calgary and Edmonton by 200 m.p.h. trains or helicopters.'"

Ultimately, said Thorne, the initiative succumbed to opposition from the bigger cities.

The air base was also shortlisted in 1989 for a long-term contract for the development of Canadian Forces Primary Flying Training, said Thorne,

who was involved in the process as a consultant.

"In our opinion, it was Red Deer's," he said of the contract. "Red Deer had the better weather centre, the ideal conditions for flying training."

But in a decision that Thorne described as being politically motivated, the contract went to Portage La Prairie, Man.

CFB Penhold was officially disbanded in 1992, although it continued to operate as a detachment of CFB Edmonton for three more years. In 1999, the airport lands were transferred to the Red Deer Regional Airport Authority — a non-profit entity created by the city, Red Deer County and the Red Deer Chamber of Commerce.

"We just thought that this was a tremendous asset for the community," said Hillman, who served on the original authority board.

"We'd seen the asset that the airport was for industry and growth in the city."

There was some confusion, he acknowledged, when after months of negotiating with the federal government it was discovered that ownership of the airport had passed to the province decades earlier.

The Red Deer Regional Airport Authority has operated the airport since, with funding from the city and county. The facility's name was shortened to Red Deer Airport in 2011.

Symbols of the its military past remain, most notably the Harvard perched prominently near the terminal building. But the Harvard Historical Aviation Society hopes its museum project will result in a more comprehensive reminder.

Red Deer County has dedicated 10 acres of land for the development, which Hillman said was a huge step forward. Now the society is focused on raising funds and collecting artifacts.

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